DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 467 689 UD 035 250

AUTHOR	Perin, Dolores
TITLE	Literacy Education after High School. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, New York, NY.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-UD-02-7
ISSN	ISSN-0889-8049
PUB DATE	2002-09-00
NOTE	4p.; Digest Number 178.
CONTRACT	ED-99-CO-0035
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Tel: 800-601-4868 (Toll Free); Tel: 212-678-3433; Fax: 212-678-4012; e-mail: eric-cue@columbia.edu. For full text: http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/pubget.asp?show=1.
PUB TYPE	ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Adult Education; *Community Colleges; Immigrants; Learning Disabilities; Limited English Speaking; *Literacy Education; Low Income Groups; Minority Groups; *Remedial Programs
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

This digest describes two major settings for adult literacy education: adult basic education (ABE) and community college remedial programs. Candidates for literacy education tend to be of low socioeconomic status and disproportionately from non-Caucasian backgrounds. The increasing number of immigrants who are not fluent in English, and often have limited schooling in their native languages, also lack literacy skills. Another group with low literacy comprises individuals with unremediated learning disabilities. ABE and community college remedial programs offer different terminal credentials: the GED and college degree, respectively. ABE programs are provided by local education authorities, universities, community-based organizations, correctional facilities, public libraries, and volunteer tutoring organizations. ABE students vary from virtual non-readers to well-educated immigrants wishing to learn English. The open admission policy of community colleges allows entry to any student possessing a high school diploma or GED. These credentials do not guarantee readiness for postsecondary literacy demands. Some states have strong policy on community college remediation, while others leave the policy to the community colleges. Recommendations for program improvement include conducting systematic evaluation of both types of programs and promoting research-based program design. Additional resources related to adult literacy research and community college remediation are listed (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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ED 467 689

LITERACY EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

ERIC Digest Number 178

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education

Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Teachers College, Columbia University

September 2002
EDO-UD-02-7
ISSN 0889-8049

UD 035 250

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DIGEST

Number 178, September 2002 EDO-UD-02-7 ISSN 0889 8049

LITERACY EDUCATION AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

In the United States, civic participation, work, learning, and critical thinking require sophisticated reading comprehension, expressive writing, oral language, and computational skills. It is, therefore, perhaps surprising to find that many adults have inadequate literacy skills in this economically highly-developed country that provides free education to age 21. However, national surveys indicate that many adults—particularly those who are urban, minority, and/or limited English speaking—lack the literacy skills they need to accomplish educational, social, and family objectives. This digest provides information on two major settings for literacy education for adults: adult basic education and community college remedial programs.

Indicators of Literacy Difficulty Among Adults

Approximately 24 percent of native-born speakers of English and 61 percent of foreign-born speakers of other languages are functionally illiterate, with severe difficulty reading text such as newspapers and literature (Tuijnman, 2000). While many of the same individuals are at least moderately satisfied with their skills (Sticht, 2001), suggesting a discrepancy between test scores and self-perceptions, 40 million adults enrolled in adult basic education (ABE) programs between 1990 and 2000.

Dropping out of high school often signals literacy difficulty. Over 10 percent of 16-24 year olds either have not received a secondary education credential, i.e., a high school diploma or General Educational Development (GED) certificate, or are not attending high school. Approximately 20 percent of tenth to twelfth graders do not complete high school. Although academic failure is not the only reason why adolescents stop attending school, dropouts often have low literacy levels.

Inadequate literacy is also found in college. Although postsecondary education is becoming increasingly important for career development, between 30-90 percent of entering community college freshmen need remedial reading, writing, or mathematics courses. Approximately 41 percent actually enroll in such courses.

Candidates for Literacy Education After High School

Native-born adults with low literacy skills tend to be of low socioeconomic status and disproportionately from non-Caucasian backgrounds. The increasing number of immigrants to the U.S. who are not fluent in English, and often have limited schooling in their native languages, also lack literacy skills. Another group with low literacy comprises individuals with an unremediated learning disability (LD). It has been estimated that up to 50 percent of adult basic education (ABE) students have LD.

Instructional Settings

ABE and community college remedial programs offer different terminal credentials: the GED and college degree, respectively. Although student characteristics and literacy skills taught may be similar, and although some ABE-completers go on to enroll in community colleges, the two systems have minimal formal connection (Reder, 2000).

Adult Basic Education Programs

ABE programs are provided by local education authorities, universities, community-based organizations such as labor unions and religious organizations, correctional facilities, public libraries, and volunteer tutoring organizations. Classes are held in high school buildings, homeless shelters, sheltered workshops, churches, prisons, storefronts, corporate offices, factories, and community college continuing education departments. Some ABE programs include bi-directional family literacy for both children and their parents (Gadsden, 2002). Others teach workplace literacy skills customized for specific jobs. In some states, television, videotape, and distance learning options are available either for independent learning or integration with classroom instruction. Typically, ABE programs teach reading, writing, and mathematics, as well as English language skills for speakers of other languages (ESOL). Instruction is sometimes provided in non-English languages for students who are unable to speak English.

ABE students vary from virtual non-readers to well-educated immigrants who wish to learn English. ESOL and literacy instruction overlap since many students may be sufficiently fluent to participate in English-language literacy classes but nevertheless demonstrate language-related literacy difficulties. Typically, course levels correspond to grade levels on standardized or informal tests of reading, writing, math, and spoken English. For example, students who score above the eighth grade level may be placed in GED classes. Previously, the GED focused mainly on reading comprehension and mathematical computation, but the most recent version includes a writing test and questions assessing knowledge of high school subject matter, making the test substantially more difficult.

The adult education field suffers from a lack of professionalization (Gadsden, 2002; Perin, 1999), exemplified by a reliance on part-time, uncredentialed instructors. Fewer than half of the states require ABE instructors to hold a teaching license; when credentials are required, an elementary or secondary rather than adult education license may be required. Further, although approximately one-third of ABE instructors are certified to teach adult education, many are not familiar with specific techniques for literacy instruction.

ABE is now experiencing an influx of 16-20 year olds who are leaving high school and enrolling to obtain a GED. Some of them have a criminal justice history and are mandated to attend ABE. As a result, behavioral and motivational difficulties are creating unprecedented classroom management problems for teachers who are more accustomed to teaching older, self-directed adults. Another challenge for programs is the high dropout rate of students at the lower instructional levels (persistence is considerably higher for GED and ESOL students). To maintain enrollment, programs may institute rolling admissions.

Community College Remedial Programs

The open admission policy of community colleges allows entry to any student possessing a high school diploma or GED. These credentials do not guarantee readiness for postsecondary literacy demands, however. On entry to the community college, the reading, writing, and math skills of degree-bound students are

assessed, usually with normed measures. Institutions vary about whether ESOL is treated as a remedial area. Decisions about literacy assessment instruments and cutoff scores are made either locally or by the state education department. Some states, such as Texas, Florida, Illinois, Washington, and North Carolina, have a strong policy on community college remediation (also known as developmental education). Others, including New York and California, leave the policy to the community colleges.

Many community college educators feel that remediation would help low scorers, but remedial enrollment may not be mandatory. Although some college-level courses impose remedial prerequisites, it is sometimes possible for students with low literacy scores to complete a degree program without having taken developmental education courses. Moreover, preparation for a vocational certificate usually does not require literacy assessment or remediation, even though workplace literacy demands may be high. Tutoring provided in academic learning centers, and curricular modification such as "writing across the curriculum," may serve as alternatives to remedial course work.

Similar to ABE, there is a wide range of curriculum and pedagogy in community college remedial courses. The remedial curriculum may be affected by the organization of developmental education within the college. If remediation is offered in the English and mathematics departments, rather than in independent developmental education departments, instruction may be closer to the content areas which students are studying (Perin, in press). Students' goals can be addressed by formally linking remedial and content courses, creating opportunities for generalization of learning as well as instructor collaboration (Perin, 2001). Further, it has been claimed that student-centered teaching is more effective than structured skills instruction (Grubb & Associates, 1999). Irrespective of organization, however, college remediation is similar to ABE in its high reliance on part-time instructors.

Recommendations for Program Improvement

High Quality Evaluation

There has been little systematic evaluation of either adult basic education or community college remedial programs. Many studies of ABE effectiveness have been qualitative, relying heavily on self-report data. While quantitative studies of community college remediation have been conducted, they have tended to be single-institution studies without control groups. Doubts about the effectiveness of traditional remedial courses are raised by findings that students who are enrolled in advanced level remedial courses may still be far from ready to meet college-level literacy demands (Perin, Keselman, & Monopoli, in press). Within ABE, the Federal government has initiated the National Reporting System which, along with growing state and local interest in performance accountability, is stimulating the development of outcome measures that can be used in program evaluation. Both ABE and community college remediation need to be evaluated regarding the generalization of skills from the educational to applied setting.

Research-Based Program Design

Despite empirical evidence from research with children showing that those with special learning needs learn best from direct, structured instruction, some ABE and community college instructors eschew this type of pedagogy because they consider constructivist, student-centered instruction to be more effective. This issue requires systematic research (e.g., Grubb & Associates, 1999). In the meantime, the finding of cognitive similarities between low-performing adults and children reading at the same grade levels by Greenberg, Ehri, & Perin (1997) suggests the need to design reading and writing instruction that combines direct, structured methods and student-centered literacy practices that are based on an instructor's knowledge of the academic, career, personal, and family aspirations of the students.

—Dolores Perin, Teachers College, Columbia University

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Additional Resources

Adult Literacy Research

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy:
http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu
National Institute for Literacy:
http://www.nifl.gov
National Center for ESL Literacy Education:
http://www.cal.org/ncle
National Center for Family Literacy:
http://www.famlit.org

Community College Remediation

National Center for Developmental Education:
http://www.ncde.appstate.edu
National Association for Developmental Education:
http://www.nade.net
Community College Research Center:
http://www.tc.columbia.edu/ccrc

This Digest was developed by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. ED-99-CO-0035. The opinions in this Digest do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of OERI or the Department of Education.

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